

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT SERVICING HANDBOOK

1.1 ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook provides Loan Servicers with guidance about the Agency's procedures for servicing actions involving borrowers receiving loans or grants for multi-family housing projects. Its goal is to help Loan Servicers in Field Offices perform consistent, effective servicing of projects financed by the Agency to ensure that they are operated in accordance with applicable regulatory and administrative requirements.

This handbook presents the Agency's project servicing procedures for:

- Section 515 multi-family projects:
 - ◇ Rural rental housing (including congregate housing and group homes); and
 - ◇ Rural cooperative housing.
- Section 514/516 Farm Labor Housing projects:
 - ◇ Off-Farm Labor Housing; and
 - ◇ On-Farm Labor Housing.

The guidance provided by this handbook is intended to be consistent with all applicable laws, Executive Orders, and Departmental regulations, including other Agency regulations. Nothing contained in this handbook should be construed to supersede, rescind, or otherwise amend such laws, Executive Orders, and regulations.

1.2 COMPANION MULTI-FAMILY HOUSING HANDBOOKS

This handbook is the third in a series of three handbooks that describe the requirements and procedures for the Agency's multi-family housing direct loan and grant programs. The two companion handbooks are:

- **RHS Multi-family Handbook #1: Loan Origination.** This handbook covers the requirements and procedures for processing loan and grant applications for multi-family housing projects, selecting projects for Agency funding, and closing the loans and grants for these projects.
- **RHS Multi-family Handbook #2: Asset Management.** This handbook covers the requirements and procedures regarding the ongoing management of multi-family projects and the Agency's oversight of borrower performance.

1.3 USING THIS HANDBOOK

The handbook is organized to allow the reader to look up information on specific topics easily. Several graphic tools and conventions have been used to make information easier to find and understand.

A. Citations and Text Boxes

- **Regulatory citations.** The regulation for Agency multi-family housing programs is provided in 7 CFR Part 3560. The text of that regulation is included in **Appendix 1**. To help readers locate the regulatory authority for procedures described here, references to this regulation appear in italicized brackets, for example: [*7 CFR 3560.51*]. Other regulations or RD instructions are simply referenced.
- **Form references.** Agency forms and Agency guide, form, and system letters are shown in *italics*. All forms referenced in this handbook can be found in **Appendix 3** and all letters can be found in **Appendix 4**.
- **Examples and exhibits.** Text boxes labeled as examples provide a specific illustration of a concept described in the text. Exhibits illustrate key points and are numbered in sequence, using the chapter number and a sequence number; for example, Exhibit 3-1 is the first exhibit in Chapter 3.

B. Attachments and Appendices

- **Glossary and acronyms list.** Key words, terms, and acronyms are defined in the glossary, and a list of acronyms is provided at the end of the handbook.
- **Attachments.** Attachments at the end of each chapter contain technical information that is specific to the topics covered in the chapter. Attachments are referenced in sequence using the chapter number and a letter. For example, **Attachment 4-A** is the first attachment in Chapter 4.
- **Appendices.** Appendices at the end of the handbook include forms and other reference materials that relate to multiple chapters.

C. Terminology

Because terminology may vary from state to state and may change over time, this handbook uses certain standard terminology to provide consistency.

- **Agency.** The term “Agency” is used throughout this handbook to refer to the Rural Housing Service (RHS) within the Department of Agriculture that is responsible for administration of the multi-family housing programs.
- **Approval Official.** This term is used whenever someone other than the Loan Servicer must approve an action.

- **Borrower.** The term “borrower” refers to one or more individuals who are receiving Agency assistance through a multi-family housing program in the form of a loan or a grant.
- **Field Office.** Because the number of offices and the nature of the work conducted in each office may vary from state to state, the term “Field Office” is used throughout this handbook to refer to the office that is originating or servicing the loan.
- **Loan Servicers.** This term refers to Agency Field Office staff with responsibility for ensuring that multi-family housing borrowers comply with program requirements and for servicing loan accounts.
- **Management Agent.** A “management agent” is an entity that contracts with the borrower to perform the management functions necessary to effectively operate a multi-family housing project.
- **State Director.** This term is used to refer to the Director of the State Office or the Agency staff person to whom the State Director has delegated decision-making authority for a specific aspect of the program. Unless otherwise specified, each State Director may determine which actions may be approved at the Field Office and which must be approved at the State Office.

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SECTION 2: OVERVIEW OF THE AGENCY'S MULTI-FAMILY HOUSING PROGRAMS

1.4 GOALS OF RHS MULTI-FAMILY HOUSING PROGRAMS

The purpose of the Agency's multi-family housing programs is to provide adequate, affordable, decent, safe, and sanitary rental units for very low-, low-, and moderate-income households in rural areas. In providing this service, the Agency strives to meet several goals.

- **Customer service.** The Agency is committed to providing customer-friendly, streamlined service.
- **Partnerships.** The Agency seeks to enhance its ability to serve eligible households by working with its partners, such as borrowers, property management agents, tenants, other lenders, nonprofit organizations, and state and local agencies.
- **Effective use of resources.** As publicly-funded initiatives, the Agency's multi-family housing programs must use tax dollars efficiently. The Agency aims to minimize administrative costs, underwrite loans responsibly, and leverage funding with private sources of credit to the extent possible.

1.5 SECTION 515 PROGRAM—AN OVERVIEW

The Section 515 direct loan program provides financing to support the development of rental units in rural areas that need housing affordable for very low-, low-, and moderate-income households, and where this housing is unlikely to be provided through other means.

Section 515 loans can be used to build, acquire and rehabilitate, or improve dwellings in rural areas. The term for loans is tied to the expected useful life of the property, and the standard term for an initial Section 515 loan is 30 years with a 50-year amortization period. However, the term for subsequent loans and loans for special types of properties, such as manufactured housing, may be made for a shorter term based on the project's expected useful life.

Each loan is made at a note rate established by the Agency as prescribed in RD Instruction 440.1, Interest Rates, Amortization, Guarantee Fee, Annual Charges, and Fixed Period. Borrowers approved for initial and/or subsequent loans receive interest credit that reduces the effective interest rate for the Agency's financing, thereby lowering the property's rents. In return for this below-market rate financing, the borrower agrees to lease the project's rental units to income-eligible households at rents approved by the Agency.

1.6 SECTION 514 PROGRAM—AN OVERVIEW

Section 514/516 direct loan and grant programs provide funds to support the development of adequate, affordable housing for farmworkers that is unlikely to be provided through other means.

A. Section 514 Loans and Section 516 Grants for Off-Farm Housing

Section 514 loans and Section 516 grants can be used for the same purposes as Section 515 loans to finance rental housing for farmworkers. Unlike Section 515 projects, Off-Farm Labor Housing projects may be built outside rural areas, as long as the project addresses a need for affordable housing for farmworkers. These projects are eligible for financing at terms comparable to Section 515 loans, a grant to cover a significant share of the development cost, or a loan/grant combination finance package. All Off-Farm Labor Housing projects operate on a not-for-profit basis. Tenants not only must be income-eligible but also receive priority based on the proportion of their income received from farm work.

B. Section 514 Loans for On-Farm Housing

Section 514 loans can also be used to finance the development of adequate housing for the farmworkers involved in a specific farm operation—On-Farm Labor Housing Project. These projects are treated as part of the farming operation and the occupants may or may not pay rent.

Labor housing borrowers who are providing shelter for domestic farm housing that is restricted for use by eligible residents supporting the borrower's farming operation may choose to provide that housing to residents without imposing charges for rent or utilities or may choose to impose charges for rent, utilities, or rent and utilities subject to Agency approval. All other Labor Housing borrowers who are providing shelter in support of farming operations in the community at large are expected to operate the program in accordance with Agency regulations governing the approval of charges for rent, utilities, or rent and utilities subject to Agency approval.

SECTION 3: GENERAL PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

1.7 CIVIL RIGHTS [7 CFR 3560.2]

The Agency will administer its programs fairly and in accordance with both the letter and the spirit of all equal opportunity and fair housing legislation and applicable Executive Orders. The civil rights compliance requirements for the Agency are contained in RD Instruction 1901-E, Civil Rights Compliance Requirements. Exhibit 1-1 lists the applicable federal laws and executive orders and highlights key aspects of these requirements.

Exhibit 1-1

Major Civil Rights Laws Affecting the Multi-family Housing Loan and Grant Programs

- **Equal Credit Opportunity Act (ECOA).** Prohibits discrimination in the extension of credit on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, age, income from public assistance, and exercise of rights under the Consumer Protection Act.
- **Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.** Prohibits discrimination in a federally-assisted program on the basis of race, color, and national origin.
- **Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968** (also known as the Fair Housing Act of 1988, as amended). Prohibits discrimination in the sale, rental, or financing of housing on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, familial status, or disability.
- **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.** Prohibits discrimination in a federally-assisted program on the basis of disability.
- **Age Discrimination Act of 1975.** Prohibits discrimination in a federally-assisted program on the basis of age.
- **Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972.** Prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in education programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance from Rural Development.
- **Executive Order 11063 as Amended by 12259.** Prohibits discrimination in housing or residential property financing to any federally-assisted activity against individuals on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.
- **Executive Order 11246.** Prohibits discrimination in employment by construction contractors (and subcontractors) receiving federally-assisted construction contracts in excess of \$10,000. It provides for equal employment opportunity without regard to race, color, religion, sex, and national origin.

A. Nondiscrimination

The various civil rights laws prohibit the denial of loans, grants, services, and benefits provided under the Section 515 and 514 programs to any person on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, marital status, familial status, age, physical or mental disability, source of income, or because the applicant has, in good faith, exercised any right under the Consumer Credit Protection Act (15 U.S.C. 1601). Discrimination in employment practices also

is prohibited. These same requirements also apply to program participants. Agency oversight of borrower compliance with civil rights laws is covered in the Asset Management Handbook. Civil rights complaints filed by tenants are handled by the Agency in accordance with RD Instruction 2000-GGG, Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) Between the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Effective management and consistent procedures are good business practices that help ensure that all applicants are treated fairly. Poor program implementation, whether or not discrimination is intended, has possible civil rights consequences.

**Key Civil Rights Issues
for Project Servicing**

- Access
- Consistency and fairness of treatment
- Disparate impacts – intended or unintended
- Record keeping

B. Reasonable Accommodations for Persons with Disabilities

In addition to avoiding discrimination, the Agency and loan and grant recipients must make reasonable accommodations to permit persons with disabilities to apply for and benefit from Agency programs. Reasonable accommodations may include the provision of facilities that are physically accessible so that all people can come to Agency offices. They may also include effective communication and outreach tools so that all applicants can obtain program information (e.g., a Telecommunications Device for the Deaf [TDD]).

Borrowers must also make reasonable accommodations in the design and construction of projects to permit persons with disabilities to apply for and occupy units at the project.

C. Civil Rights Impact Analysis

Agency employees will conduct civil rights impact analyses in accordance with RD Instruction 2006-P to determine whether proposed policy actions, if approved and implemented, will negatively and disproportionately affect employees, program beneficiaries, or applicants for employment or program benefits due to race, national origin, or other protected basis.

1.8 REVIEWS AND APPEALS [7 CFR 3560.9]

Decisions that are not made in favor of a program participant (applicant, borrower, grant recipient, management agent, or tenant) are known as adverse decisions. Adverse decisions include: (1) administrative actions taken by Agency officials; and (2) the Agency's failure to take required actions within time frames specified in statutes or regulations, or within a reasonable time if no deadline is specified. Program participants have the right to request that any adverse decision be reviewed by the next-level supervisor. In addition, some adverse decisions may be appealed to the National Appeals Division (NAD). **Appendix 2** contains 7 CFR Part 11 that provides procedures that both Agency officials and program participants must follow when an appeal is made.

A. Informing Program Participants of Their Rights

Whenever an Agency official makes a decision that will adversely affect a program participant, the official must inform the participant in writing that a review by the next-level supervisor may be requested and whether the decision can be appealed to NAD.

Agency letters notifying participants of adverse decisions must contain the required information about reviews and appeals. Specific civil rights language that must be included in such letters is provided in **Attachment 1-A**.

1. Review Requests

Participants who want to request a review by the next-level supervisor must do so within 15 days of the date of the Agency's letter notifying the applicant of an adverse decision. The request may be made verbally or in writing. Copies of written requests must be retained in the participant's case file. If a verbal request is made, field staff must carefully document the request and place a copy in the case file.

2. Appeal Requests

Participants who wish to appeal an adverse decision must submit a written request to NAD within 30 days of receiving notice of an adverse decision. The request must be personally signed by the participant and include: (1) a copy of the adverse decision to be appealed; and (2) a brief statement describing why the participant believes the decision is wrong.

NAD will notify the participant and the Agency after it has made a final determination. If NAD reverses the Agency's decision, the next loan servicing action that would have occurred had no adverse decision been made must be taken within 60 days after the effective date of the notice from NAD.

B. Decisions That Cannot Be Appealed

Decisions that cannot be appealed include:

- Decisions made by parties outside the Agency, even when these decisions are used as a basis for Agency decisions (such as when an applicant disagrees with a private lender's decision not to provide credit for a leveraged loan);
- Interest rates set by the Agency's procedures, unless the participant alleges that an incorrect interest rate was applied; and
- An official's refusal to request an administrative waiver.

Even though these decisions are not appealable, Agency staff must provide the participant an opportunity for a review and for submitting a written request to NAD to confirm that the decision cannot be appealed.

C. Tenants and Applicants and the Tenant Grievance Process

The Agency has a formal process for resolving tenant grievances. Tenants and applicants for tenancy may file complaints and may be entitled to a hearing, depending on whether the grievance is legitimate and whether it can be resolved through informal means. Tenant grievance procedures are discussed in detail in Chapter 6, Section 8 of the Asset Management Handbook.

1.9 CONFLICT OF INTEREST [7 CFR 3560.10]

All Agency employees must strive to maintain the highest levels of honesty, integrity, and impartiality in conducting their activities on behalf of the Agency. The Agency's conflict of interest requirements are described in RD Instruction 1900-D, Processing and Servicing Rural Development Assistance to Employees, Relatives, and Associates. To reduce the potential for conflicts of interest, all processing, approval, servicing, or review activity must be conducted by Agency employees who:

- Are not the recipient (applicant or borrower), a recipient's family member, or a close known relative of the recipient;
- Do not have an immediate working relationship with the recipient, the Agency employee related to the recipient, or the Agency employee who would normally conduct the activity; and
- Do not have a business or close personal association with the recipient.

A. Borrower Disclosure

Borrowers must disclose any known relationship or association with Agency employees.

B. Agency Employee Disclosure

Agency employees must disclose any known relationship or association with a borrower, regardless of whether the relationship is known to others.

C. Disposition of REO Properties

Agency employees and members of their families are precluded from purchasing REO property, assumptions from Agency borrowers, or security property sold at a foreclosure sale. Closing agents and members of their families are precluded from purchasing properties in which they have been professionally involved.

1.10 OTHER FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS

A. Environmental Requirements [7 CFR 3560.3]

The Agency considers environmental quality equally with economic, social, and other factors in its program development and decision-making processes. Both Loan Originators and Loan Servicers are responsible for effectively integrating Agency environmental policies and procedures with servicing activities. It is particularly important for Loan Servicers to be aware of environmental requirements concerning sites, especially during the liquidation process, when the Agency needs to ensure that it will not acquire property with an environmental liability. Agency environmental policies and procedures and historic preservation requirements can be found in RD Instruction 1940-G. Agency-assisted properties also must meet the lead-based paint requirements contained in Exhibit H of RD Instruction 1924-A, Planning and Performing Construction and Other Development. Resolution of conflicts or significant differences between Agency environmental regulations and state or local environmental laws requires prior consultation with National Office environmental staff.

B. Construction Standards

Sites and dwellings developed or rehabilitated with Section 515 or Section 514/516 funds must meet the construction standards outlined in RD Instructions 1924-A, Planning and Performing Construction and Other Development and 1924-C, Planning and Performing Site Development Work. Existing dwellings must be decent, safe, and sanitary and must meet all applicable state and local codes. Certain state construction codes and requirements may influence RD Instructions 1924-A and 1924-C.

C. Administrative Requirements

Agency employees must comply with Agency and Departmental administrative requirements.

1. Procurement

Goods and services procured to support Agency activities such as appraisals, inspections, broker services, and property management services must conform with the policies and procedures of RD Instruction 2024-A.

2. File Management

Files and other Agency records must be maintained in accordance with RD Instruction 2033-A.

3. Handling Funds

Project funds must be handled in accordance with RD Instruction 1902-A.

1.11 EXECEPTION AUTHORITY *[7 CFR 3560.8]*

Exceptions to any requirement of this handbook or 7 CFR Part 3560 may be approved in individual cases by the Administrator if application of the requirement or failure to take action would adversely affect the Government's interest or conflict with the objectives and spirit of the authorizing statute. Any exception must be consistent with the authorizing statute and other applicable laws.

Requests for exceptions are submitted to the Administrator, through the Deputy Administrator, Multi-family Housing and may be initiated by the State Director; the Deputy Administrator, Multi-family Housing; the Director, Multi-family Housing Processing Division; or the Director, Multi-family Housing Portfolio Management Division.

The exception request must provide clear and convincing evidence of the need for the exception. At a minimum the request must include:

- A full explanation of the circumstances, including an explanation of the adverse effect on the Government's interest;
- A discussion of proposed alternatives considered; and
- A discussion of how the adverse effect will be eliminated or minimized if the exception is granted.

Requests to the Administrator for exceptions regarding architectural and engineering, environmental, or civil rights issues will include the review and comments of the appropriate National Office Technical Staff.

ATTACHMENT 1-A
EQUAL CREDIT OPPORTUNITY ACT
ECOA NOTICE

“The Federal Equal Credit Opportunity Act prohibits creditors from discriminating against credit applicants on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, age (provided that the applicant has the capacity to enter into a binding contract); because all or part of the applicant’s income is derived from any public assistance program; or because the applicant has in good faith exercised any rights under the Consumer Credit Protection Act. The federal agency that administers compliance with this law is the Federal Trade Commission, Equal Credit Opportunity, Washington, DC 20850.”

Department of Agriculture regulations provide that no agency, officer, or employee of the United States Department of Agriculture shall exclude from participation in, deny the benefits of, or subject to discrimination any person based on race, color, religion, sex, age, disability, or national origin under any program or activity administered by such agency, officer, or employee.

The Fair Housing Act prohibits discrimination in real estate-related transactions, or in the terms and conditions of such a transaction, because of race, color, religion, sex, disability, familial status, or national origin. If an applicant or borrower believes he or she has been discriminated against for any of these reasons, that person can write to the Secretary of Agriculture, Washington, DC 20250.